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American Poetry: An Overview

Article · December 2015

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Siddhant Kalra August 09, 2015

‘American’ Poetry

William Carlos Williams is famously known to have said “It is very easy to talk about American poetry because there isn't any such thing” (qtd. in Dolan, 31). His implication is a historical one and it begs the question, “what is American poetry?” Any discourse on ‘American literature’ as a continuum implicitly attributes both temporal and spatial demarcations to the term ‘American’. America seldom finds mention in the narrative of post-colonial cultures when, in fact, it was the first colony to become a new nation. The New World was inhabited mostly by European immigrants and in that sense, the poetry of the Native Americans would be considered ‘indigenous’ to the American mainland. However, the land of the Native Indians betrays every attribute of the concept of ‘America’. In fact, ‘America’ was born only by displacing indigenous natives. However, their oral tradition of hymns, songs and war chants has influenced later American writing much more than is conventionally believed. Their pantheistic inflections were expressed through haiku-style imagery on a wide-ranging plethora of themes (Early American and Colonial Period). Conventionally, native Indian lyric is placed outside the realm of American poetry, despite its influence on what is considered to be conventional American poetry.

“I

the song

I walk here”

– An anonymous Modoc song.

It is the European immigrants, particularly the British, who began writing poetry in the American colonies in the English language. In 1650, Anne Bradstreet’s Elizabethan inflections appeared in *Tenth Muse*. Even though she wrote in Massachusetts, her poetry makes no reflexive attempt to synthesize an ‘American’ identity. Like most other colonies, the American identity emerged in opposition to their colonizers’. The American Nation was born out of the defiance of its European progenitor, only after the revolutionary wars. The retroactive colonial influence of British culture provided the modes for America to find its own cultural identity. Thus began the synthesis of the American identity: American politics, American literature, American music, American cuisine and so on, all spawning from, or in opposition to their respective colonial origins. An ‘American’ is the embodiment of this process of mitosis and of the republican values espoused by the founding fathers of the American republic.

“I certainly do not think of the tradition of American poetry as simply a homogenized addition to the English tradition. I feel that we are lucky to inherit it with a particular closeness, but that we also inherit the whole tradition of poetry in the language. I don't think there is much to be gained by self-conscious efforts to write some kind of genuine American poetry. If American poets write poems they will be that” – **W.S Merwin**

The New Critics would claim that it is the poem - that is the *text*- that matters, and not the context that domiciles it. However, the challenge of defining American poetry presents a case of irrefutable correlation. As post-independence America bloomed, the reactionary creation of the recently decolonized American milieu saw the concurrence of the emergence of the American identity and the emergence of American writing. American writing witnessed a nationalistic rebirth which in turn sought a national literature and very consciously so. Thus, the narrative of American poetry unfolds as a reflection of the narrative of the 'American' itself. Divorcing this marriage would be tantamount to ignorance of the conscious efforts made to attain an American poetry. Emerson's plea to an American poet, Ezra Pound's rigour in mentoring and Eliot's meditations would all be rendered mere events, impotent in moulding the American verse whereas in reality, their affectation is immutable.

I. The American Spirit

After failed attempts in the latter half of the 16th century, marginalized denizens of the British empire flocked to the new world at the cusp of the 17th century. The first successful British colony was established at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. The Mayflower's voyage from Plymouth in 1620 was the first successful British attempt at establishing a colony in New England. The pilgrims that it brought with it were Seperatists and English Puritans. Convicts had already begun arriving before the Mayflower and soon, the majority of immigrants to America were indentured servants (Moller, 117). The New World was not for the wealthy, upper-classes of Britain, but for those who already perceived themselves as antithetical to the British identity. It is appropriate then, that these social rejects and their progeny would go on to create an American identity, also antithetical to the British.

Among the immigrants, the English Puritans asserted their proselytising gaze on the American culture-scape. They came, most notably; assail the *Mayflower* to William Bradford's Plymouth colony and the *Arabella* to John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Colony in the first half of the 17th century (Reuben). Early writers in America from the first half of the 17th century were from these Puritan colonies and were technically British. Protestant Christianity - especially Puritanism - dominated the early socio-cultural formation of America. Naturally, the first American poets were British Protestants like Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672), Edward Taylor (1642–1729) and Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705).

Infinity, when all things it beheld

In Nothing, and of Nothing all did build,

Upon what Base was fixt the Lath wherein

He turn'd this Globe, and riggalld it so trim?

Who blew the Bellows of His Furnace Vast?

Or held the Mould wherein the world was Cast?

Who laid its Corner Stone? Or whose Command?

Where stand the Pillars upon which it stands?

***The Preface,* Edward Taylor**

Samuel Sewall (1652-1730) was born late enough within the Puritan reign to witness the transition from an austere Puritan lifestyle in the past to an aristocratic indulgence in wealth. His *Diary* inadvertently alludes to his rather aristocratic lifestyle (Early American and Colonial Period).The chains of religious discipline that the Puritans had tethered in the past in exchange for an anti-nomian devotion to God had percolated through as the distillate of their culture by the third decade of the 18th century. However, the influence of Puritanism on the American mindscape remains immutable. Max Weber's famous discourse on the causality between Protestant ethics and Capitalism is a testament to that. Their influence gave substance to early American poetry both in form and in content and thus, American poetry in English was initiated with anti-nomian Puritan ideals and an inherent sense of introspection and rigour that was ultimately lost within the Puritan community (Ziff, 299). However, their values would later resurface in the poetry of the Transcendentalists. Apart from the commonality of Puritan Christian themes, the puritans wrote discursively: "from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history" (Early American and Colonial Period). While they differed from their counterparts in England in terms of their anti-nominial beliefs, in terms of style their poetry could be classified as metaphysical poetry that was dominant in the homeland. In that sense, their poetry and the Puritan values therein only served to consolidate the ideal foundation for its successors.

During the same period, the South, which later produced some of the finest American literature, lay barren in an aristocratic wasteland of massive plantations. Ironically, the black slaves - who made the noble, genteel lifestyle possible in the first place – were among the first Southerners to write poetry in English (Ibid.). Jupiter Hammon (c. 1720-c. 1800) was a black American poet whose voice embodies the beginning of black poetry against slavery in America, engendering a prominent strand in American poetry even in the modern period.

The period after the revolution till the civil war is not known to have produced any 'literature' per se. As the 'American' identity was unleashed, it was the synthesis of a national identity that dominated the cultural sphere (Democratic Origins and Revolutionary Writers). Publishers had to be paid to print literature and consequently, most of the writing of the time took the form of political essays and pamphlets and naturally, found a wide readership. In England, the Classicists – most notable Alexander Pope, Horace and Samuel Johnson – had set the standard for poetry in the first half of the 18th century. The Romantics (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats) broke away from the Classicist model to make way for their Gothic indulgences in the second half of the century. American Poetry of the time (like that of the Hartford Wits) however, showed stale imitations of the older English classical school. As Hedges points out, while there were only a few American literary writers at the time, there was an abundance of highly influential political writing (Hedges, 3). It was the time to write the Declaration of Independence and not literature. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* sold more than 100,000 copies and consequently, aided to accelerate the revolution.

"It [the post-revolution period upto 1815] produced no literature of note and that it was, from the standpoint of literary creation, the feeblest generation in American history has been the verdict of all our historians."

(Fred Lewis Pattee, 1935 qtd. in Hedges, 3)

Norman Foerster's *The Reinterpretation of American Literature (1*928) defined the major factors in American literature as "(1) the Puritan tradition, (2) the frontier spirit, (3) romanticism, and (4) realism" (qtd. in Hedges, 4). The first two factors mentioned by him form the core values of not just

American literature but also of the American sensibility. While the foundation years did not witness much in terms of innovation in style and form, they manifested the eyes through which Americans could and would write poetry. Just as the frontier spirit seemingly broke free from European models and institutions; it was time for American poetry to reflect its sublimate transcendence.

II. The American Poet

The emphasis on an authentically American literature entered the socio-cultural consciousness of the nation in the first few decades of the 1800's. While Romanticism had displaced Classicism in England and had become the dominant tradition, American Romanticism began somewhere in the 1820's (Romantic Period). At first sight, it might seem like American poetry had betrayed its intention towards originality but their brand of Romanticism was born with the spirit of a newly-independent nation. The group of poets from Concord in New England that emerged as the embodiment of Romanticism in American called themselves the Transcendentalists. It was this group of poets that took it upon themselves to define American poetry.

The period of Transcendental poetry is often termed the American Renaissance. Noah Webster published *An American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828 (Dolan, 32). America had found their version of the English language. The Transcendentalists had loosely collected themselves by 1836 in Concord and even had their own magazine, *The Dial (*Romantic Period). In line with their Romantic inclination, the transcendentalists saw the individual as a microcosm in itself; the individual was one with nature and thus, was a revelation of it. Thus, the idea of the self acquired a new connotation, divested from its previously 'selfish' one. The Puritan values of New England, where Transcendentalism was born, and the American drive for a national identity both retroactively reflect themselves in the Transcendental pursuit. For them, art was the aesthetic dimension of nature, and thus, was only natural to an individual.

"…Not gold but only men can make
A people great and strong;
Men who for truth and honor's sake
Stand fast and suffer long.

Brave men who work while others sleep,
Who dare while others fly…
They build a nation's pillars deep
And lift them to the sky.

- **A Nation's Strength (1847) by Ralph Waldo Emerson**

"In *The Poet (1841-1843),* Ralph Waldo Emerson calls for an American Milton whose poetry will justify the ways of America, knowing full well that he himself is not the American poet that he seeks"

(Dolan, 33). Emerson had paved the way for an authentic American poet to be born. The iambic pentameter that was so essential to English poetry, from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Wordsworth to Tennyson, was seen as being undemocratic by Emerson. The transcendentalists broke free from the convention and opened up to the possibility of 'free verse'. Walt Whitman accredited Emerson for his creation of the free verse in *Leaves of Grass (1855)*. "I was simmering, simmering, simmering and it was Emerson who brought me to a boil" (Whitman qtd. in Dolan, 35). With Whitman's magnum opus, America presented its own poetry to the world, with its own values and its own form.

Would you hear of an old-time sea-fight?
Would you learn who won by the light of the moon and stars?
List to the yarn, as my grandmother's father the sailor told it to me.

Our foe was no skulk in his ship I tell you, (said he,)
His was the surly English pluck, and there is no tougher or truer, and never was, and never will be;
Along the lower'd eve he came horribly raking us.

Song of Myself: 35 by Walt Whitman

Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim to an American poetry; "a poetry of the new lands, new men, new thoughts that were America" (Emerson qtd. in Dolan, 34), marks the American's self-reflexive claim to his poetry as his national poetry. The spirit of American writing from the period reveals itself in a funny mixture of the implicit nationalism in the self-reflection of Emerson's words and the Occidental values his poetry meditated upon. Even though his poetry wasn't explicitly political, the nationalist intent towards an intellectual independence shines through; an intent that embodies the active engagement of the American poet with his nation. However, his verse espoused the values of the east, inescapably mired in the inflections of British Orientalism. He initiated an American Orientalism with the intention of opening up the self to the ways of the East, but ironically ended up mired in the same Orientalist discourse that the British had contrived for themselves and for the world.

It is rather strange that a discourse on American poetry in the 19th century does not mention Edgar Allen Poe, but there is good reason for that. Poe's poetry liberated the American style not in its defiance of conventional British form, but instead his verse released poetry from the need of being noble and serious (Dolan, 33). He introduced the horror genre in American literature. Even though he wrote before the Transcendentalists and was read around the same time, it is precisely because Poe was outside the fold of a conscious exploration for an American poetry that he is often excluded from the grand narrative. That is not to say that his influence was paltry. He influenced writing both within the States and outside, like the Symbolist movement in France.

Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow:
You are not wrong who deem

That my days have been a dream;

Yet if hope has flown away

In a night, or in a day,

In a vision, or in none,

Is it therefore the less gone?

All that we see or seem

Is but a dream within a dream.

A Dream Within A Dream (1849), Edgar Allen Poe.

Another poet, a contemporary of both Poe and the Transcendentalists, who is often excluded from the conscious assertion of the American poet is Emily Dickinson. A female poet from Amherst, she was apprehensive of the transcendental style because it was thought to be "disreputable" (qtd. in Dolan, 37). Her poetry, even though there isn't much of it, is unhindered by rhetoric, of ornamental expression. Instead, her verse was simple and like Hemmingway, she treated poetry like "architecture" instead of "interior decoration" (Hemmingway qtd. in Dolan, 40). The body of poets that Poe and Dickinson represent is conventionally left out of the grand narrative of American poetry, but some would argue that in their unconsciously original verse, they managed to achieve what the Transcendentalists had set out in pursuit of.

Luck is not chance—

It's Toil—

Fortune's expensive smile

Is earned—

The Father of the Mine

Is that old-fashioned Coin

We spurned—

Luck is not a Chance by Emily Dickinson

The period of the Civil War (1861 – 1865) between the North and the South and the period that followed right after did not produce much poetry, but is known for exceptional 'regionalist' and cosmopolitan writing by the likes of Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Henry James. America had begun transforming from an agricultural landscape into business-centric industrial complex; the Capitalist tendencies of the nation that the late Modernist poets and their contemporaries were in vehement opposition of. However, Emile Zola's naturalism of the late 19th century had migrated to America and poets like Stephen Crane had adopted the style and appropriated it to the typically American realism of the time.

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;

Round and round they sped.

I was disturbed at this;

I accosted the man.

"It is futile," I said,

"You can never —"

"You lie," he cried,

And ran on.

I saw a man pursuing the horizon **by Stephen Crane**

In addition, the post civil-war period also saw the resurgence of Black American poetry, following in the footsteps of Jupiter Hammon. Like W.E.B De Bouis, James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) found inspiration in African-American spirituals.

Heart of what slave poured out such melody

As "Steal Away to Jesus?" On its strains

His spirit must have nightly floated free,

Though still about his hands he felt his chains.

O Black and Unknown Bards (1917) by James Weldon Johnson

III. Modern America: Dystopia

The period of the World Wars (i.e 1914 – 1945) is said to be the harsh coming of age of the American nation. However, it would be facile to reduce the influence of the World Wars to America. Prior to the wars, America had cultivated its poetic identity in its own North American continent. The Wars dissolved one of the fundamental tenements of America: the frontier. It propelled America and The European nations alike, into an abrupt kink in history and in the haze of the bloodshed, forced them to rejuvenate their cultural identities. The modernist movement saw innovation in both verse and prose both in Europe and in America. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S Eliot, Franz Kafka, Rilke and many more were all developing their own styles, but with one commonality: a disenchantment with traditional values and modes of expression. Their influences were wide-ranging: from the Russian realists, to the French symbolists, to the psychoanalysis of Freud and the socialism of Marx. For America, this further protracted the search for its national poetics, but in a manner divergent from its antecedent. 'The Lost Generation' of the 1920's had acquired the baton of the poetry of their nation and of the modern world. As America meandered towards the materialistic paradise that it is today, the lost generation sought newer havens.

In the sense of innovation, the lost generation begins with the self-proclaimed mentor herself, Gertrude Stein (1874 – 1946). Stein was a resident of Paris and her importance to the modernist movement is two-fold. Firstly, her poetry sought a model of poetry that was analogous to modern art in its technique. "Meaning, in Stein's work, was often subordinated to technique, just as subject was less important than shape in abstract visual art" (Modernism and Experimentation).

A Table A Table means does it not my

dear it means a whole steadiness.

Is it likely that a change. A table

means more than a glass even a

looking glass is tall.

From *Tender Buttons (1914),* Gertrude Stein

While her poetry wasn't widely read, it is the second facet of her contribution to the modernist movement that commands much higher significance. Her residence in Paris attracted spearheads of the Modernist movement like James Joyce, Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemmingway. The degree of her influence is a task for a separate study altogether, but her active moulding of Modernist literature is undeniable.

The modernist trajectory that Stein had traversed was protracted by five major American poets during the Modernist period: Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Pound, Eliot and Frost consciously indulged in rediscovering the American verse. All three of them had moved to London because" the soil of America was too thin and the climate too arid to sustain so complex a plant as literature" (Dolan, 41). While there, they also had mutual associations of which the duo of Pound and Eliot became one of the most definitive associations in American poetry. Eliot's apocalyptic embodiment of the modernist sentiment, *The Wasteland* (1922) was a product of the Pound-Eliot association. This is true not only in that the manuscript is heavily edited by Ezra Pound, but also in that Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly (1920)* and Eliot's *Wasteland* are companion poems, both prompted by World-War 1.

There died a myriad

And of the best among them

For an oíd bitch gone in the teeth

For a botched civilization.

For two gross of broken statues

For a few thousand battered books.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberly by Ezra pound

Both poems reek of disillusionment with Europe and Western Civilization in general, even announcing the apocalypse of a civilization, in need of rejuvenation. Pound had taken off from where Whitman had left off. Both he and Eliot wanted to transform a poetry that was all too British, but they differed from Whitman in the manner they adopted to do so. Their method was delving into the multicultural tradition of poetry, especially in Europe, and with that knowledge, rediscovering the American verse. To Whitman, Pound says:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman.

I have detested you long enough.

I come to you as a grown child

Who has had a pig-headed father;

I am oíd enough now to make friends.

It was you that broke the new wood,

Now is a time for carving.

We have one sap and one root

Let there be commerce between us.

***A Pact* by Ezra Pound**

They acknowledge the fact that it is because of the initial reactionary defiance by Emerson and Whitman that unleashed the free verse, and in turn enabled modernist inflections in American poetry. Inevitably, the infamous iambic pentameter again, became an element of contention. In the beginning, both Eliot and Pound believed that the free verse too free and Eliot's rhymes in Wasteland allude to this conviction. But ultimately, their experimentation more or less gave it up. Ezra Pound said, "The first heave was to break the pentameter" and William Carlos Williams said, "We must take the iambic pentameter line and wring its neck" (qtd. in Dolan, 40). Pound's imagist verse and Eliot's discursive dystopian poetry informed by Eastern philosophy formed the cornerstones of poetic innovation in the modern period. Robert Frost on the other hand adopted a far more tolerant disposition towards British poetry. He claimed that it was important to keep the iambic pentameter and his aim was to modify the existing models to come up with an American one. Consequently, his poetry employed the use of traditional rhyme schemes. In his lucid style which made his poetry accessible to the general audience, Frost chose to write about a nostalgic farm life with frequent natural imagery (Modernism and Experimentation). While not overtly pessimistic about modern Western civilisation in his poetry, Frost's nostalgic harking back to the good old life alludes to his disenchantment. Williams Carlos Williams, a subtly imagist poet, or 'objectivist' as he liked to call himself, is similar to Frost in the sense of lucid writing. His poetry was composed of simple language, alluding to a keen understanding of American English. Williams hated *Wasteland.* He though it was too learned: Sanskrit, Portuguese, French; the poem was too learned, too European to be American (Dolan, 41). When Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl (1956),* Williams wrote a preface for it and sustained his mentorship because he saw Howl as the second Whitmanesque revolution in Howl.

The Modernist period also saw what is commonly known as 'The Harlem Renaissance' in New York in the 1920's. Perhaps the most comprehensive strand in Black American writing, the Harlem Renaissance embodies the inklings towards an African-American poetry that had already begun to emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries. Poets like Jean Toomer (1894 – 1967) wrote about the black person in America looking for a communal identity (Modernism and Experimentation).

IV. Post WWII: An American Poetry?

After the modernist period, the dystopian inflections of the Modernist poets and their typical cynicism of modernity had percolated through, and had even been aggravated. Post World-War 2, American poetry saw two strands develop simultaneously: The Traditionalists who wrote in tradition poetic forms with set meters like Richard Wilbur and Richard Eberhart and The Experimentalists; the school of William Carlos Williams. In a sense, history had consistently disrupted any attempt at forming a cohesive tradition. Consequently, the poets of this period saw the relinquishing of a continuum. An authentically American poetry seemed impossible. If Whitman's efforts could be dismissed by Pound as only an initiation and Eliot's can be dismissed by Williams as too elitist and European, where is American poetry to be found?

In a sense, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl (1956)* and Eliot's *Wasteland (1922)* both represent two strands in American poetry that are antithetical to each other. The latter is American in that it is learned, elitist and yet, is an oracle of western civilization. The former, on the other hand, is obscene and free in form. They both share the same cynicism of Western civilisation but adopt contrary modes of poetic expression. The Beat Generation in San Francisco emerged in the 1950's. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, George Corso and William Burroughs formed the core. Their influences were markedly different from their literary ancestors: a hedonistic lifestyle, the underground Jazz culture and psychedelics. Their poetry resounded the truth that the American people didn't want to hear. The court case on *Howl* embodies the resistance of the American culture to Ginsberg's 'lewd' expression. The beat poets believed that it was automated writing that came from inside that had real substance. The emphasis on the self is reminiscent of the Transcendentalists just about a century ago. Apart from pioneering the free-verse, the beat poets also pioneered performance poetry. The famous San Francisco readings are a pivotal part of the corpus of performance poetry anywhere in the world. Another movement - if it can be called that - that celebrated both personal poetic expression and performance poetry is the group of poets fallaciously put under the imposed label of 'Confessional poetry'.

The label of 'Confessional poets' primarily refers to Robert Lowell (1917 – 1977), Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963) and Anne Sexton (1928 – 1974). These poets themselves would hardly subscribe to the label, but it is undeniable that there are similarities in their poetics. Robert Lowell was encouraged to indulge himself in experimental poetry after reading Ginsberg's poetry and he modelled his verse after the poetry of Williams (Dolan, 42). With *Life Studies (1956)* he initiated confessional poetry. With strong emphasis on personal feeling, lucid form and brief expression, Lowell made it possible for a poet to write an intimately personal poetry. The poetry of later Confessionalists like Plath and Sexton is largely influenced by Lowell. Both Plath and Sexton wrote poetry in the Confessionalist style. While Plath was a master craftsman, Sexton had a knack for emphatic poetic expression.

Apart from the Beat poets and the Confessional poets, the period leading up to the present moment also witnessed an explosion of multi-cultural forms and of literature of those whose voices were only marginal in the grand narrative. Feminist poetry, Black American poetry, Latin-American poetry and Native American poetry are just a few of the examples. As history approached the millennium, in the time of mass culture, it is almost impossible to adopt a selective synthesis of an American grand narrative. Charles Bukowski's American low-life exists simultaneously with Charles Wright's Chinese

influences. However, it is at this precise moment that we look back and attempt to capture the spirit of American poetry.

Conclusion

The narrative of American poetry begins with the Puritans and the Transcendentalists and ends at the suspension of any essentialist attempt to define in in the 21st century. Thus, it would be fallacious to speak of an authentic American poetry as a reserve of inherently American ideals and forms. The Orientalist discourse and the theories therein make any attempt at an original poetry inherently post-colonial and hence, derivative. It seems much more circumspect to speak of American Poetry only as a historical narrative that embodies the effort of the Americans to find their own poetry.

American poetry witnessed a shift from a generic optimistic tone during the time of the Puritans and Whitman, to a dystopian dismissal in the modernist period that has persisted ever since. This shift coincided with the shift of America from an agricultural land to an industrialised pioneer of Capitalism. This generic shift also alludes to the constant engagement of the American poet with his surroundings; his engagement with social commentary. Apart from this self-reflection as a nation, the most fundamental commonality that this narrative reveals is the perennial self-reflection and self-modification of American poetry, generation after generation. Whitman, Pound and Eliot, Williams, Frost are all trying to break-away from what are 'traditional' modes for their generations, but innovative modes for their ancestors. The question of whether or not they succeeded is irrelevant for there remains the simple commonality of 'breaking away'. From the beginning, the American identity was synthesised in opposition to the British, and American poetry pays testament to that facticity. What is worth noting in particular is the conscious attempt to break away; the conscious rigour of self-creation. The exceptions to this tendency like Plath, Dickinson and Sexton developed their own forms emanating from the person within and in that sense, were least susceptible to mimicry through conscious opposition.

The American tradition of poetry has also, at all times, seen the mentorship of one poet or another, protracting the newfound ideas of his generation onto the next. Whitman, Pound, Stein, Williams and Robert Lowell are prime examples. Through their active engagement the tradition acquired a continuity that it would otherwise be bereft of.

Finally, America is fundamentally a nation of foreigners who became American in due time. From the beginning however, as is typical of literary narratives (like with the Brahmins in the Indian sub-continent), the voices of a few acquired the authority of the dominant voice. However, staying true to its multi-cultural spirit, American poetry developed countless strains of the poetry of the marginalised. Feminist literature, Queer Literature, Black literature, Latin American literature, Native American literature are just a few of the examples of this, but the list can go on and on.

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